

Never Let Them Tell You They're All the Same by osaki_nana_707

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Summary:

It's Parents' Day at Hawkins Elementary. Steve doesn't expect his old high school rival to be there too. He also doesn't expect the heart-to-heart that follows. Then again, Steve's learned not to expect anything in life, so it kind of works out.

(A gift for [justakidfromhellskitchen](#) for getting me back on the writing train after some major writer's block).

Never Let Them Tell You They're All the Same

Author's Note:

- For [justakidfromabadan](#).

Never Let Them Tell You They're All the Same

It's definitely him, Steve is sure.

The hair is shorter, the body a little softer, and the shirt not so err... *unbuttoned*, but Steve's not as stupid as people always seem to say and he knows that the guy talking to his daughter's friend Katie is Billy-fucking-Hargrove, okay?

He's briefly frozen in the doorway of the classroom as his own daughter, Hannah, rushes in to go for her drawings. It's Parents' Day at Hawkins Elementary, and Steve had made sure to take off work to be there because shit is hard enough for Hannah since the divorce and the move to Hawkins. Steve hadn't ever planned on coming back, but when everything went sideways, he figured things would feel a little sturdier in a place that had once been completely Upside Down. Familiarity bred comfort at least, or that was his excuse.

(It wasn't that his house in Indianapolis was bigger and lonelier than his parents' house when his wife left, not at all. It wasn't that the loneliness in small town Hawkins didn't feel quite as all consuming as the loneliness in the city. Not at all).

Anyway—he's losing his train of thought. He doesn't need to be thinking of *himself* right now because Billy-fucking-Hargrove, emphasis on *fucking*, is in the classroom with Katie and holy shit is Billy Hargrove a fucking dad?

Steve briefly considers slipping right back out the door. He thinks he can just tuck Hannah under his arm and run, run like the fucking wind, but then Billy-fucking-Hargrove—he really needed to lay off of the cursing because he was in an elementary school—Billy Hargrove

is turning and their eyes are meeting and ohhhhh fuckkkkk.....

He sees it the moment Billy *fff*—Hargrove recognizes him, watches the realization dawn on him like someone just, well, like someone just broke a plate over the back of his head. He's stunned, and his eyes get all glassy. He looks a little off balance, but then he recovers, chin tilting up. He looks *good*. Better than a dad of a kindergartener should look. Steve feels like he looks like garbage in comparison because he hasn't been sleeping worth a shit since he was eighteen and that does things to a person.

(He's still got great hair though).

Katie looks too and Steve doesn't know how he didn't realize Katie is Billy's kid. She's got his same blonde curls, his same long eyelashes. God, she looks just like him! Maybe Steve really is as stupid as people say.

Steve looks away, tries to pretend he and Billy didn't just make five-agonizingly-long-seconds of Eye Contact, and Hannah makes that easier because she's there next to him with her dark hair pulled up on top of her head and her drawings from her art class in her hands. "Look at what I drew!" she says.

He crouches and takes the pictures from her. She really is an incredible artist, destined to be the one who tours the world with her amazing paintings one day and he's absolutely *not* biased at all. He smiles as he goes through them, making enthusiastic comments between her long rambling explanations of what each and every single thing in every single picture is.

He almost thinks it's enough to send off the hint that it's probably best they pretend they don't know each other, but Billy Hargrove hasn't changed that much. At least not enough to take a fucking hint. Suddenly Billy and his tight jeans are standing right there next to him. Steve senses the warmth of his body before he sees him, can feel it in the way the hairs on the back of his neck stand up and how his heart rabbits in his chest. He's not sure what he's feeling. It's kind of a messy concoction of things, he thinks—dread definitely, and confusion. Tension.

He's not going to say *arousal* because first of all, No. Second of all, he's in an elementary school and therefore the word *arousal* should not currently exist in his vocabulary.

"Harrington," Billy says, and he sounds the exact *same*. It takes Steve instantly back to ten years ago in a locker room, at a Halloween party, at the Byers' house before he got his lights knocked out. It takes Steve back to weeks after that when Billy had shoved him against the shower wall, stared into his eyes like he was about to do *something*, and then storming out. It takes Steve back to the time that he'd thought about that stare for goddamn *months*, especially after Billy's Camaro drove off into the sunset after graduation day and never came back.

Steve raises back to his full height, because height is the only thing he has on Billy, and he shoves his hands into his pockets and goes for casual. He hopes he succeeds. "Fancy seeing you here, Hargrove," he says. "Didn't think I'd ever see you in Hawkins again."

"I could say the same about you," Billy says, equally casual. Both of their daughters are suddenly across the room, playing together, like they knew they didn't need to be involved in this. "Shit happens."

"Yeah," Steve says softly. "It does."

God, this is awkward. Why would Billy subject them both to this? Steve would have taken him for a sadist over a masochist any day.

"How you been?" Billy asks, like their entire relationship up until this point hadn't been animosity followed by years of distance and silence, punctuated with the memory of that fucking *stare*. Billy's eyes are the same as they were then, still soft blue and pretty and delicate and not like him at all.

"Uh... good," Steve says, because that's what you're supposed to say when someone asks you how you've been. "How about you?"

Billy always goes against what you're supposed to do, so instead of saying *good* he just shrugs, looking away, scrubbing a hand over the back of his neck. He looks like he wants to say so much, just like he did that time in the locker room, but he's not looking at Steve at all

now. Steve doesn't know why he wishes he would.

"Been a long time," Billy says, not answering Steve's question.

"Ten years, give or take," Steve says. "What brings you back to Hawkins?"

"Various reasons. Dad had a heart attack a couple of months ago and kicked the bucket, and it was my *responsibility* to make sure he was buried in a *respectable* way." His voice grew bitter with a story Steve didn't know but could probably guess some of it. Max had talked about her stepdad's temper a little bit, but something always told him she wasn't his main outlet for it.

"Doesn't seem like something you'd have to move for," Steve says.

Billy's gaze sharpens slightly, but he still doesn't look at Steve. He's looking at Katie instead. "I was having some trouble financially, so Max let me and Katie stay at her place 'til I get back on my feet. She's got a place here that she lives in when she's not at school, so I just keep it clean until she gets back. Is that a good enough answer for you?"

This Billy is instantly more familiar. The anger and the smartass grin that's no joy and all teeth.

Steve is apparently a masochist too, because he continues to poke the bear by asking, "Where'd she come from?" indicating Katie.

"You see, Harrington, when a man sticks his dick into a vagina—"

"Dude," Steve says sharply. At least Billy had said it quiet enough that (hopefully) none of the kids heard.

Billy rolls his eyes. "A fling," he says. "I was trying to make something out of nothing. I guess in a way I succeeded."

Steve doesn't quite know what he means by that, but he doesn't get the chance to ask because then Billy's asking, "How about you?"

"Met a girl at school. Got married. Got troubles. Got divorced," Steve explains, and he really doesn't know why they're just talking like

this. Like they're buddies. "Moved back recently."

Billy nods curtly, jaw working. "Huh. Well. I guess that explains why Katie took a shine to your kid so fast. They're both the new kids at school. They got somethin' in common."

Steve feels himself soften a little. He looks back at his girl, at *their girls*. They absolutely *are* friends. Hannah hadn't stopped talking about Katie since they moved to Hawkins. He looks down at the drawings in his hands and hands them to Billy. "Katie's in all of Hannah's drawings. From what I've heard about her, she's a good kid."

Billy looks almost *pained* by this, like he doesn't know how to take the compliment, however indirect. He looks so on the cusp of saying something or maybe even crying that it makes Steve want to clap him on the shoulder, if for no other reason than to see if he can knock whatever it is out of him.

"Is her mom in the picture?" Steve asks.

"Sometimes," Billy says. "She's got her own shit. We were both running from shit, and her shit caught up with her, so Katie's with me exclusively for now. What about Hannah's mom?"

"She gets Hannah during the summer, and we trade off on holidays," Steve sighs.

"Is it weird? Being here like this with me?"

It's been the thing Steve's been thinking since he first saw him, but Billy asks it without hesitation and without preamble and it catches him off guard.

"Uh... yeah, it's... it's a little weird."

Billy's face softens a little at the edges, touched by something dangerously close to relief. "Bet you never thought I'd be a dad, huh? Or at least one that wasn't a deadbeat."

Steve doesn't answer that. He doesn't know if he's comfortable with Billy knowing how much he's thought about him at all, much less

specifics.

“I never thought I’d be any good at it either,” Billy says, looking back at his daughter. She and Hannah are coloring together and other kids have joined their circle. “Turns out, being a dad’s the only thing I’m good at.”

That pained expression returns to Billy’s face, and Steve actually feels his hand lift from his side to touch, but he doesn’t get the chance to actually manage it.

“You wanna go outside for a smoke?” Billy asks.

Steve doesn’t smoke anymore, hasn’t in years.

Still, he says, “Sure.”

The girls are currently occupied anyway, so they slip out to the parking lot. Steve almost laughs because Billy still has that goddamn Camaro, and it’s in perfect fucking shape. It makes Steve *ache* with familiarity, and he feels like he’s sat in it a million times even though really it was only the once when he was dragged to the underground tunnels with a very young Max behind the wheel. Billy starts the engine so the music plays, but he doesn’t turn it up. It’s Led Zeppelin. Steve never really listened to Zeppelin that much, but he recognizes Robert Plant’s unique voice instantly. The music is softer than Billy’s old music, just like this version of Billy is softer than the old (or rather, *young* him), with the lilt of mandolins instead of screeching guitar.

“Spent my days with a woman unkind, smoked my stuff and drank all my wine... Made up my mind to make a new start, going to California with an aching in my heart...”

Billy lights up a cigarette, tilting his head back, exposing the length of his neck. Steve’s not staring, not really. He blinks and everything. Just... slowly. Billy takes a pull, holds the smoke for just a moment before snorting it out of his nose. He hands the cigarette to Steve rather than giving him one of his own, and suddenly they’re sharing it like friends. Steve takes a drag with the confidence of a man who’s smoked much more recently and ends up with a cough and watery

eyes because of it. Billy laughs, but it's not as cruel a sound as he remembers. When Steve's vision clears and he looks up, Billy's still smiling, and his eyes have crinkles around the edges.

Holy shit. Had he always been this fucking pretty?

"Hey," Steve says, handing it back, "lay off. I quit years ago."

"You could've just said no," Billy offers.

Steve falters a little because yes, that's true. He's not entirely certain why he agreed to this to begin with.

Billy takes a puff, rolls the window down a little to tap the ash out of it. "Come on, man, you know I didn't ask you out here to smoke. Otherwise you wouldn't have come."

Steve doesn't say anything to that either. He just waits.

He might not be the brightest, but he thinks he's starting to figure out that when it comes to Billy, waiting quietly is the best thing he can do. Billy's not one to answer questions, but he'll start talking on his own if given enough time. It's something Hannah does. It's something Will Byers used to do when Steve babysat all of those little shitheads.

"Seems like the wrath of the Gods got a punch on the nose and it started to flow; I think I might be sinking," sang Robert Plant.

"This is Katie's favorite song," Billy says suddenly. "When she can't sleep, I'll put her in the backseat and play the song and drive her around until she does." He's looking out the windshield, looking far beyond the parking lot, out into nothing, or at least nothing that Steve can see. "She gets a lot of stuff from me, but... hopefully not everything."

Steve realizes then that Billy's leading into something, and he can't stop looking at his profile, the slope of his nose, the length of his lashes, the slightly chapped skin on his lips.

"I was a real asshole when I was in high school," Billy says then. "The worst kind of fucking person. There's not an excuse for it, and... yeah..."

Steve hesitates. He knows he should keep waiting out, but he can't help himself. "Are you... apologizing to me?"

"I'm *trying* to," Billy says irritably. "God, you're so fucking impatient."

Steve feels he's been much more patient than Billy's giving him credit for, considering this was an apology ten years in the making, but he doesn't want to rock the boat. "Okay," Steve says instead. "Well... I mean... that's high school shit. I'm not the same person I was then and neither are you, so... let's just call it square."

Billy looks at him, and his blue eyes are soft, like the color of the sky on a late morning in spring. "You haven't changed at all, Harrington," he says with the certainty of a fact, even though Billy knows nothing about him. Steve certainly feels like he's different, or at least that he *should* be, but then he thinks about it and realizes he's still the guy in Hawkins that takes care of kids and has nightmares. The only real difference is that the kid is one of his own now, instead of a gaggle of found ones. Maybe Billy's right.

"You're different though," Steve offers, rather than argue the point.

"Not as different as I wanna be," Billy says, and it sounds weird because Billy really seemed to love himself back in high school. He was all swaggers and smartass comments. He had a different girl on his arm every week, was the star of the basketball team, and he constantly talked about himself. Billy seems to read all of this on Steve's face because he follows it up with, "Don't get me wrong, I'm still the handsomest devil you ever did see. It's..."

He pauses, wets his lips, looks away. He takes another long drag on the cigarette and hands it back off to Steve again. Steve waits.

"I just got real tired of being so fucking angry all the time," Billy says slowly, softly, almost to himself, "and it fucking sucks because... it's so easy. It's so easy to be pissed off, to just rage until you burn out because it feels like it's fixing everything... but it isn't. Sometimes you just gotta drive around and listen to the same song over and over until you can cool off and go to sleep."

“Does Katie get angry?” Steve asks, wondering if that’s the right thing to say.

“Of course she does,” Billy says, squeezing the steering wheel a little. “She throws the biggest goddamn fits I’ve ever seen because shit’s not fair. Her momma kept fucking her over until she fucked up so much that she can’t see her anymore, and then her dad dragged her to this nowhere town to live and she can’t see the ocean anymore. That’s a lot to put on a fucking kid.”

Steve isn’t sure Billy’s actually talking about Katie.

“She gets so angry,” Billy continues, his eyes dipping slightly, staring at the top of the dashboard but definitely still not looking at Steve. Something like shame colors his features. “I have to fight so hard not to get angry back... I can’t even walk away, you know? I can’t leave her there by herself. She’s a kid. She makes a mess, and I tell her to go to her room, and I clean it up, and I sit there and just *try*... I gotta fight that fire in me so hard, Harrington. I don’t want her to be like this. I don’t want her to be like me.”

Steve presses his lips together. He looks around at the Camaro, realizes it’s not as pristine as he first thought. There are stains in the backseat, likely from Katie. There’s a crack at the bottom of the windshield that trails all the way from one side to the other. One of the sun visors is duct-taped in place, and there are cigarette burns in the upholstery of the driver’s seat. Maybe when Steve had seen the car, he’d seen it in 1985 and not now. Just like when he’d seen Billy.

1995 Billy is not 1985 Billy. Not at all.

“Hey, Harrington,” Billy says, drawing his attention back. “You know what’s real funny? How you think when your demons die, you’re gonna stop being afraid of them.”

The statement hits Steve like a fucking wrecking ball. It hits him so hard he’s not sure how he managed not to fall out of the car and go flying across the parking lot. It hits him and he has to sit there with it, letting it suffocate him until Billy finally looks at him and Steve realizes what that expression was that was on Billy’s face earlier.

Billy Hargrove is *haunted*.

His monsters may not have faces that bloom open like flowers full of razor-sharp teeth, but they exist.

Billy smiles a little, but it doesn't meet his eyes. "You think they're gone, they can't get you anymore, you know?" he continues, like he hasn't taken all of the air out of the Camaro with his words. "Then you get up in the morning, take a shower, and then there's your demon's face staring back at you in the mirror." He takes a final drag off the cigarette, then flicks the butt of it out the crack in the window. "You tell yourself you're seeing things. You have to keep telling yourself that... but what if you're wrong? What if the monster is actually there this time? What if you are the monster?"

Steve takes a shaky breath at last. The air had been there the whole time, turns out. He'd just forgotten how to breathe. "It's the kind of shit that makes you sleep with the lights on," Steve says, "and carry a baseball bat in your trunk."

Billy watches him, searching for Steve's demons in his face. He doesn't seem surprised that Steve has them, only that he doesn't know what they are. It makes Steve wonder if Billy's been watching him closer than he realized, if he'd been doing it back in high school too.

Billy breaks eye contact and doesn't ask, and for that Steve is thankful.

"I don't wanna end up like him," Billy says. Steve knows who *he* is, even if Billy says nothing. "I'm scared it's gonna happen anyway. That no matter what I do, it's just gonna end up like that. The cycle fucking continues. I've screwed up so much, especially shit that I care about, all those times I threw punches in fights I shouldn't have, and all those times I didn't fight back when I should've. Times I should've said stuff, and I didn't. I always made the wrong choice. Who's to say Katie's gonna end up any better?"

"Well..." Steve says, "I... I'm offended."

Billy jolts, looking at him like he's sprouted a second head.

Steve offers a half smile and says, “I’m offended because you’re bringing in my Hannah’s judge of character here. She’s a *great* judge of character and she likes Katie, so Katie must be a good kid. She’s a good kid, Billy. With a dad that tries really fucking hard. I think you’ve already blown expectations out of the water with that alone, right?”

For a brief second Steve thinks Billy might actually start crying. He can see it well up inside of him, the way his face reddens and his throat works and his eyes glass over. Steve wonders how often Billy gets told he’s doing a good job. He wonders how often he’d *ever* been told.

“I really fucked up with you,” Billy says, turning away with a breathless laugh. “I really, really fucked up with you.”

Steve leans back in the seat a little. “You’re not the first person who ever beat my face in, you know. You probably won’t be the last.”

“Not that,” Billy says. “Well... I fucked up with that too, yeah, but...”

Steve raises his eyebrows slightly. His lips part, and he wonders.

He can’t help it.

“Are you talking about what happened in the locker room?”

The smile drops from Billy’s face, replaced with probably justified surprise. He doesn’t try to play it off, doesn’t try to ask *what are you talking about?* Instead, he says, “You remember that shit?”

Steve shrugs. “In the grand scheme of things it probably shouldn’t be something I remember. After some of the shit I’ve seen, one weird confrontation in a shower shouldn’t really stick in my brain, but yeah. I remember. What was that all about, huh?”

Billy doesn’t lean back, but it still feels like he gets farther away.

“That’s where you fucked up, right?” Steve says. “Because you didn’t say something. What did you want to say that day?”

Billy doesn’t budge, so Steve sits up, leans closer. Billy’s not the only

one who can invade personal space, he thinks.

“What was it?” Steve asks more firmly, and Billy’s staring, staring, *staring* right into his eyes. He’s staring with his big, blue eyes, and he’s not budging, he’s not budging, he’s—

He’s kissing Steve.

Billy Hargrove is kissing Steve like it’s the only thing he’s ever wanted to do in his goddamn life, and Steve realizes distantly that maybe, perhaps, it is.

It takes a second for the shock to wear off, but it’s definitely the nicest kiss Steve’s had in a while, so he rolls with it, letting his eyes close and his head tilt to make capturing his mouth a little easier. Billy’s far from the first guy Steve’s ever kissed (thanks, college!), but this is definitely better than any other experimentation he’d gone along with. Billy kisses with a soft, restrained hunger, chasing Steve’s mouth but not forcing it. He sucks on Steve’s bottom lip, lets his teeth nibble slightly, lets the tingles linger. He tastes like toothpaste and cigarettes, which is a flavor that absolutely should not work at all, but somehow it does. He doesn’t let his tongue intrude until Steve lets him, and that’s when he gets a little rougher. His hand circles the back of Steve’s neck and pulls him closer. He fists his hand into Steve’s hair. Steve is moaning over the brush of Billy’s stubble, over the weight of Billy’s hand on his thigh as he presses closer, closer. He is devoured and devouring and it is glorious.

Then, as suddenly as it started, it stops. Billy’s staring at him, wide-eyed and panting, lips pink and swollen, and he looks like a spooked animal about to take off running. It’s pretty apparent that he didn’t think he’d get this far.

“Uh,” says Billy intelligently.

“You alright, man?” Steve asks, like Billy’s just taken a fall on the basketball court and not like they’d just been making out five seconds ago.

“...yeah...” Billy says in slow-motion.

“So...” Steve says, equally slow.

“Uh,” Billy says again.

“Was that what you wanted to do? Back in the locker room? You trying to tell me you were sweet on me, Hargrove?”

Billy blushes all the way to the tips of his ears and down his chest. The panic is back, stronger this time, and Steve almost thinks he needs to reach over and grab him before he escapes. “Dude,” Steve says, “it’s fine. It was nice. Haven’t been kissed like that in a while.”

Billy looks away, and he’s absolutely *humiliated*. It hangs over him like a dark cloud, drenching him in the rain of his shame. Billy scrubs his hand over his mouth, like he can wipe away what he’s done, and Steve wonders how long this weight has been hanging on him, how long he’s carried this around. His anger in his youth starts to make a little more sense as Steve puts the pieces together. Steve knows better than anyone that fear is one hell of a motivator. He just suspects he and Billy have different outlets for it. Steve likes to play hero. Billy just wants to break something. Anything they can do to feel less helpless and broken.

Steve finally grabs Billy’s shoulder like he’s been thinking of doing so many times today. Billy’s hands are knuckle white on the steering wheel. “You know, no matter what anyone told you,” Steve says, “it’s not something to be ashamed of.”

“No one *told* me,” Billy mumbles. “They just tried to beat it out of me.”

Steve feels Billy tremble under his hand, watches him try to steel his expression into something more neutral. He doesn’t want Steve’s pity, doesn’t need it. Steve gives his shoulder a squeeze and lets his hand drop.

“Well, uh,” Steve says awkwardly, “if you’re gonna keep up with the apologies and face sucking, the least you can do is buy me dinner first.”

Billy lets out a wet laugh, curling in on himself, forehead falling to

the top of the steering wheel. “You’re something else, Harrington.”

Steve opens up the passenger side door of the car. “Come on,” he says. “Katie and Hannah are probably wondering where we are.”

Billy stares at him, awestruck, and just nods before getting out of the car and following him back into the school like a lost puppy dog.

They don’t mention the kiss to one another at all, but later, when Billy is sitting at a squashed little table with Steve and Hannah and Katie is enthusiastically telling him the entire plot of *The Lion King*, Billy looks lighter, younger. It’s like something inside of him has shaken loose. Steve doesn’t know quite what it is, but he thinks he might want to.

Maybe Katie can come over for a sleepover. Maybe Billy can come too.

Author's Note:

I'm on [tumblr](#)